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The Greatness of Lincoln

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President William Howard Taft
Washington D. C.

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4/3/1912.



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Abraham Lincoln

By transfer
The White House
1913

This address was delivered in the First Baptist Church, at Parsons, Kansas, on February 12th, A. D. 1912, on the occasion of the celebration of the one hundred and second anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln, which patriotic function was held under the auspices of Parsons Camp, Sons of Veterans, of the Department of Kansas.

Dedication

This tribute I pay to Abraham Lincoln today, is dedicated to the memory of my father, Richard Tyner Wagstaff, a private in Company A, Eighty-third Illinois Infantry, United States Volunteers, and his late and living comrades in arms.

THOMAS EDWARD WAGSTAFF.

INDEPENDENCE, KANSAS.

The Greatness of Lincoln

“A blend of mirth and sadness, smiles and tears,
A quaint knight errant of the pioneers,
A hero born of star and sod,
A pleasant prince,
A masterpiece of God.”

We are come, to this house of God and dedicated
for humanity's good, to commemorate the birth, pay a
tribute and do honor to the name and worth of
ABRAHAM LINCOLN, THE GREAT EMANCIPATOR.

Rich are we, the loyal sons of patriotic and militant
sires, in the heritage of patriotism and devotion to our
country's welfare; sons of those warriors of '61 to '65,
who formed the mightiest of hosts ever mustered under
one flag since Freedom's name was known.

We come not here today to lay upon the altar of our
devotion a libation of tears for those loved ones now
gone or those still here, in the sear and yellow leaf of
life; but soothed and sustained by that ennobling and
splendid thought, we are the direct heirs of that senti-
ment and unalloyed patriotism for that principle,

“Liberty unrestrained is humanity's own reward.”

Could rocks their fastness break, could nature throw
aside that mysterious sable mantle, called death, could

our illustrious fathers appear once again upon the scene of action, we call life—how could we, present or in future, touch the heart chords of their truest emotions, or quicken, perchance, the pulse of their beings, show more respect, a purer love portray, than on this natal day of their Grand Commander proclaim, declare, affirm and say, “Thank God, there was a Lincoln.”

I pause upon the very threshold of this address to assert that I, yea!

“Words in no language spun
Could appropriately depict his worth
Or the deeds he has done.”

In all history, either Christian or profane, there is none save One, whose character and good offices for the uplift of the human race, stands forth in more bold relief—yes, there is One, or One in Three—the Lowly Man of Galilee. And how not dis-similar the birth, the life and death of each. One born in a manger, the other near it; the One a carpenter, the other a son of a poor but honest cabinet maker; One, the first known artificer of our spiritual grace, the other His prototype on earth of the truest application of His teachings.

Both were born to strife, to grief and to die that you and I might live and today truthfully say:

“We are living, we are dwelling,
In a grand and glorious time,
In an age on ages telling,
To be living is sublime,

And like the distant mountains uprear
Their granite bastions to the skies
Are crossed by pathways that appear,
As we to higher levels rise.”

But oh, how unfair to both and to their sainted mothers, is history's page. Thanks be to God, in this late day, under the searchlight of investigation and the white light of truth and fact, every stain has been erased from their fair names. To the extent, that in verse and in song we rise and sing:

"Blessed Mother, Virgin Mary,
A saint in Heaven and on earth.
Pure sweet Nancy Hanks,
God bless you for Lincoln's birth.

Right forever on the scaffold,
Wrong forever on the throne;
And behind the dim unknown
Standeth God within the shadow,
Keeping watch above his own."

History does not again produce a parallel in personalities and happily, nothing of grace or of beauty is lost to the One or the other, by the equation. One died that we might live, the other lived to die because he loved his fellowman, not sentimentally but fundamentally.

It is therefore meek and right that we, the sons of the comrades of the latter should pay him this tribute in the House of God, for the Immortal Lincoln never took an important step without first bending the pregnant knee for Divine guidance and His blessing. No man ever lived, either of state craft or of letters, who more truthfully recognized the omnipotence of Him whose hand guides all our destinies. His favorite saying was:

"There is a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we may."

Away back yonder in 1849 Lincoln realized, though he did not then act in unison with his belief, that the retributive justice of God Almighty awaited this nation for the awful sin of chattel slavery.

It was Lincoln's rugged philosophy, that man born of woman had one certain definite purpose or object in life to attain, short of that, was failure. In support of this postulate, in his homely dialectics, he would often by way of example, refer to the lovable character of the Christ. And who amongst us of this later day can deny the force of such illustration. Not to be tautological, Christ was single-purposed. To deny His mission, its accomplishment or that the seeds thereof though sown among tares and thistle, have reaped an abundant harvest for good and the betterment of all mankind, is to contradict the grace and stability of modern civilization.

So likewise with Lincoln, seemingly destiny alone or that unaccountable force which sways the judgment or guides the path of man, ordained, that his major act in the drama of life, was to preserve the union of the sisterhood of states.

Mankind is ever prone to connect the greatness of the idea of unity with means, and God with ends. Finite thought is to compel all men to follow the same course to gain the object desired. But my conception of Deity is that He introduces infinite variety of action and so combines them, that all those acts or routes lead a multitude to the accomplishment of one great design.

I believe Jefferson Davis and his cohorts honestly believed they were right, but in choosing, they selected

the human idea of unity, which is almost always barren of results. It was the Confederacy's definite purpose to compel the establishment of slavery, or at least its acknowledgment and legal sanction by the entire nation.

Lincoln at the helm of state, held to the Divine idea of unity, which is always pregnant with attendant results. I do not claim that Lincoln was inspired or immortal, but I do maintain it was the purpose of a just God, and of both spiritual and natural development in Lincoln and civilization, that someone, sometime, somehow, somehow, should forever cement the bonds between the sisterhood of states. To do so effectually and perpetually, was to wipe out forever the hated stain of slavery from within their midst. It matters not whether the emancipation of the negro was constitutional, revolutionary or the result of conquest. Unity came only when chattel slavery was dead. Lincoln accomplished it and that is enough for all.

Abraham Lincoln's pre-eminent greatness lay in that combination or faculty both of analysis and synthesis—added to that, the mighty force of a high resolve. Frequently we touch elbows with those who possess the ability to analyze, those to construct, and some with perseverance; but how many, if any, do we know in life or in history who possess the three fundamentals of true greatness? How aptly is illustrated such genius in Lincoln when in closing his Second Inaugural he said:

“With malice toward none,
With charity for all,
With firmness in the right,
As God gives us the light,

Let us finish the work we are in, and bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and his widow and his orphans, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

Again how beautiful, graceful and poetical is that epic of all English literature when he said:

"Fondly do we hope,
Fervently do we pray,
That this mighty scourge of war
May speedily pass away."

Pull down if you may the musty volumes of ancient or mediaval history, examine, forsooth, the rhetorical or didactical utterances of a Confucius, an eloquent Phillipic of Demosthenes, the cold, stern and foreboding commands of all the Cæsars; not in any or all of them is there such strength, such logic or such statecraft as in those lines I now quote from Lincoln's First Inaugural:

"I hold that in the contemplation of universal law, and of the constitution, the union of these states is perpetual. Perpetuity is implied, if not expressed in the fundamental law of all national government."

Alone is comparable with the strength of such logic, the immeasurable force of Old Ocean's wild, angry waves as they beat against the granite rocks of St. Helena's lonesome shore, and in seething retreat borne upon their crests, the storm-tossed wreck of ambition's highest hope and unholy desire.

Is it any wonder, when the cruel hand of the assassin fired the fatal shot, that made midday mid-

night without a space between, the Bard in requiem of sorrow and the realization of loss penned such verse:

“There’s a burden of grief on the breezes of Spring,
And a song of regret from the bird on its wing;
There’s a pall on the sunshine and over the flowers,
And a shadow of grave on these spirits of ours;

For a star hath gone out from the night of our sky,
On whose brightness we gazed as the war cloud rolled by;
So tranquil and steady and clear were its beams,
That it fell like a vision of peace on our dreams.

A heart that we knew had been true to our weal,
And a hand that was steadily guilding this wheel;
A name never tarnished by falsehood or wrong,
That had dwelt in our hearts like a soul-string song;

Ah, that pure, noble spirit has gone to its rest,
And the true hand lies nerveless and cold on his breast;
But the name and the memory, these never will die,
But grow brighter and dearer, as the ages go by.”

Courageous he was, but not reckless, kind, but not sentimental, at all times modest and unassuming; a martyr whose very blood ever pleads to you, to me and to posterity, for fidelity, for law, for liberty. In the life and worth of him whom we, as sons of his comrades do delight to honor, can we not fittingly say? His name, his statecraft and his greatness is worthy of the emulation of others to the emolument of all who so strive.

“That this nation under God, shall have a new birth of freedom and that government of the people, by the people and for the people, shall not perish from the earth.” To the extent that you and I may say:

“Your flag and my flag
See it floats today,
Over your land and my land
And half a world away.

Rose red, blood red,
Its stripes forever gleam;
Pure white, soul white,
Our fathers’ fondest dream ,

Sky blue, true blue,
Its stars that shine aright;
A glorious guidon by the day,
A shelter through the night.

Your flag and my flag,
And oh, how much it holds!
Your land and my land,
Safe within its folds.

Your heart and my heart
Quickens at the sight,
Sun kissed, wind tossed,
The red, the blue, the white.

The one flag, the great flag,
The flag for me and you.
Glorified all else beside,
The red, the white, the blue.”



RICHARD TYNER WAGSTAFF
Private in Company A., Eighty-Third
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